DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 479 439 IR 022 116

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TITLE	Distance Education Quality: The Resources--Practices--Results Cycle and the Standards.
PUB DATE	2002-10-00
NOTE	7p.; In: E-Learn 2002 World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, & Higher Education. Proceedings (7th, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, October 15-19, 2002); see IR 022 093.
AVAILABLE FROM	Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), P.O. Box 3728, Norfolk, VA 23514. Tel: 757-623-7588; e-mail: info@aace.org; Web site: http://www.aace.org/DL/.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; *Distance Education; Educational Assessment; Educational Development; Educational Practices; *Educational Quality; Educational Resources; Foreign Countries; Instructional Effectiveness
IDENTIFIERS	United Kingdom; United States

ABSTRACT

The development and implementation of effective distance education happens in an iterative cycle. The three stages are: (1) procurement and preparation of the resources necessary to meet the distance education goals; (2) delivery of instruction using the best practices from education, business and research; and (3) analysis of the results of distance education to gauge achievement of the goals. Each stage of the Resources--Practices--Results (RPR) cycle continually revisits lessons learned in the other stages and builds upon the successes realized in the other stages. This paper explores the match among the established success factors incorporated into the RPR cycle and six sets of distance education standards published by higher education boards and councils in the United Kingdom and in the United States at national and regional levels. There is variation in the degree to which the standards address the RPR success factors. (Contains 15 references.) (Author)

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ED 479 439

Distance Education Quality: The Resources—Practices—Results Cycle and the Standards

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Abstract: The development and implementaticon of effective distance education happens in an iterative cycle. The three stagess in the cycle are (1) procurement and preparation of the resources necessary to meeet the distance education goals, (2) delivery of instruction using the best practicess from education, business and research, and (3) analysis of the results of distance educcation to gauge achievement of the goals. Each stage of the Resources--Practices--Results (RPR) cycle continually revisits lessons learned in the other stages and builds upon the successes realized in the other stages. This paper explores the matcch among the established success factors incorporated into the RPR cycle and six sets cof distance education standards published by higher education boards and couuncils in the UK and in the US at national and regional levels. There is variatioon in the degree to which the standards address the RPR success factors.

Defining Quality

In its December 2000 report to Congress, the Web-Basced Education Commission made high quality online educational content one of its seven critical issues. In orcder for a student or institution to determine whether quality has been achieved, quality must be defined. IPrimarily, distance education programs must serve institutions in meeting their goals. A central goal of edducation is developing independent learners who can capably apply their knowledge to new situations. To enssure that distance education offerings meet this goal, providers must identify desired learning outcomes and insstructional methods. Quality indicates that instruction is effective and appropriate. The definition of quality maay include quantitative elements such as completion rates, student performance, and student evaluations of tthe learning experience. Qualitative dimensions may include ratings of teaching-learning events, materials, leearning process, pace, activities, content and options offered to students. Several higher education accrediting; and policy groups have recently released distance learning standards as guides toward quality improvement.

The Quality Distance Education Cycle

The process of developing and implementing effective disstance education happens in an iterative cycle. Broadly considered, the three stages in the cycle are (1) procurement and preparation of the resources necessary to meet the distance education goals, (2) delivery of instruction uusing the best practices from education, business and research, and (3) analysis of the results of distance educattion to gauge achievement of the goals. Each stage of the **Resources–Practices–Results (RPR)** cycle continuually revisits lessons learned in the other stages and builds upon the successes realized in the other stages (Cawanaugh 2002). Each stage requires participation of all stakeholders, including students, instructors, support and design professionals, administrators, and the community. The success factors included in each stage aire based on decades of research and experience with learners from professions, higher education and K-12 education (Barker, 1999; Bruce, Fallon & Horton, 2000; Cavanaugh, 1999; Educational Development Associates, 1998; Fredericksen, E., Peltz, W. & Swan, K., 2000; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2000; Mantyla, 1999).

This paper explores the match among the established success factors incorporated into the RPR cycle and the distance education standards published by higher educatiion boards and councils.

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The Resources Phase of the RPR Cycle

The resources required to sustain a quality distance education program exist to support students, faculty, and the program or institution toward achieving the goal of effective and appropriate learning. Responsive and flexible human resources, knowledge, skills, policies, procedures and technical infrastructure enable quality practices and contribute to quality results. Procurement, development and adaptation of resources are ongoing processes.

Success factors for the Resources phase:

- Institutional policy that values distance education
- Strategic plan for delivering distance education to students
- Stakeholder analysis to determine needs of graduates
- Financial commitment that gives the direction regarding program implementation
- Team support for distance educators and students
- Appropriate technology infrastructure
- Program standards to guide course design and delivery
- Program review to ensure that all components of the program meet standards and to ensure that the standards contribute to program goals
- Effective communication of policies and expectations to students
- Student services: information, advising, orientation, and security
- Information privacy
- Qualified, experienced staff and faculty
- Community involvement in the program's goals, policies, and outcomes
- Information provided to faculty about teaching in the distance learning environment
- Instructor release time for course development
- Instructor training in distance education pedagogy and technology
- Course design and delivery assistance
- Well-designed and appropriate learning materials
- Student orientation and training
- Student access to learning resources and instructors
- Technical support for instructors and students
- Technology plan to communicate goals to all users

The Practices Phase of the RPR Cycle

With the right resources in place, the stage is set for dramatic distance learning performance. At this point the spotlight shifts from the institution to the instructor. Quality distance teaching begins with the careful design of courses, materials and learning activities. Next, the instructional practices employed during instruction will aim at developing independent learners with the ability to transfer their learning to novel situations. Throughout the course, effective communication and community building are essential foundations for all events.

Success factors for the Practices phase:

- Focus on content and students
- Relevant and important skills and knowledge addressed in courses
- Structured information presented in motivating context
- Social strategies to promote student comfort, control, challenge
- Fast feedback from instructors to students
- Consistent design throughout each course
- Highly interactive activities for student engagement

- Authentic communication among students, instructors and experts
- Course activities designed to maximize student motivation
- Activities focused on high-level cognitive skills
- Development of information literacy
- Development of applied technical skills

The Results Phase of the RPR Cycle

The only way to know whether a distance education program has achieved quality is to compare the program results to established quality benchmarks. Measures of quality are tied to institutional goals, and account for the specific context of the program. To maintain success, a distance education program evaluation must account for institutional and instructional factors as well as student factors. Evaluation of course and program results is a continual process that involves all stakeholders and requires a wide range of tools. Success is evaluated by through assessment of student learning, program review, and program accreditation.

Success factors for the Results phase:

- Student independence developed through opportunities for self-assessment
- Peer review of student work as a professional experience
- Creation of student portfolios to showcase accomplishments
- Varied assessments for an accurate view of student abilities
- Open-ended assignments to increase thinking skills and reduce cheating
- Secure online testing
- Ongoing course evaluation by students
- Evaluation of program by students and faculty
- Review of program outcomes and components by all stakeholders
- Program accreditation

Standards

Worldwide, organizations with an interest in distance education have published standards to guide institutions and instructors in delivering quality courses and programs. Standards have been developed by regional and national higher education accrediting bodies, by national education labor unions, and by national councils concerned with higher education and distance learning.

Title of standards document	Agencies	RPR success factors addressed	Web address
Distance Learning Guidelines	The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. UK	10	http://www.qaa.ac.uk
Standards in Open and Distance Learning	Open and Distance Learning Council. UK	10	http://www.odlqc.org.uk
Distance Education Guidelines for Good Practice	Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers. US	16	http://www.aft.org

Evaluation of Distance Learning Programs	National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education	14	http://www.ncate.org
Principles of Good Practice	Southern Regional Education Board. US	17	http://www.electroniccampus.org
Distance Education: Definition and Principles	The Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. US	19	http://www.sacscoc.org

Table 1: Standards used in this analysis

The *Distance Learning Guidelines* of The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the UK "offer advice on assuring the quality and academic standards of higher education programmes of study provided through distance learning" and "are concerned with arrangements made by UK universities and colleges to provide programmes of study by means of distance learning" (QAAHE 2002). The standards will be reviewed and become the starting point for a code of practice for distance learning.

> The guidelines have been produced at the request of the distance learning community in the United Kingdom, which has recognised not only that the continued development of this form of higher education and its worldwide acceptance depend upon rigorous quality assurance, but also that there are many areas in which the usual ways of doing things for 'on-campus' provision are not necessarily appropriate in the context of distance learning (QAAHE 2002).

The Open and Distance Learning Council of the UK developed *the Standards in Open and Distance Learning* to apply across the range of open and distance learning. The Council accredits ODL programs meeting the standards, and acts as a clearinghouse of information on ODL providers for students. An independent body, the Council was set up at the request of government to enhance quality in education and training, and "to protect the interests of learners, through the accreditation of open and distance learning providers. Accreditation includes a rigorous assessment of a college's administrative and tutorial methods, educational materials and publicity. Accredited colleges are monitored to ensure that students continue to receive good service, and are re-assessed at least once every three years." (ODLC 2002)

The Higher Education Program and Policy Council of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in the US created the *Distance Education Guidelines for Good Practice*. The AFT, a labor union, developed the guidelines from distance learning literature and from surveys of distance educators. A goal of the standards project was to specify in detail practices found to be effective. The guidelines were published to "assist faculty members teaching, or preparing to teach, distance education courses, as well as higher education locals negotiating distance education issues with management" (AFT 2000). The guidelines are also designed to serve "college administrators and public officials who want to put quality at the center of their technology programs, as well as other organizations around the country" (AFT2000). The primary focus of the standards is the college credit-bearing two-year, four-year and graduate program.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in the US released the *Evaluation of Distance Learning Programs* as a guide for evaluators of teacher preparation programs. Distance learning components are subject to the same standards as other components of accredited teacher preparation programs.

The Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) in the US helps students find in high-quality courses and programs at colleges and universities in the SREB region. The *Principles of Good Practice* "were developed to assure students about the quality of courses and programs at the Electronic Campus. The principles draw upon the work of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education and other organizations. All courses and programs to be listed in the Electronic Campus have been reviewed against the Principles of Good Practice by

the offering colleges or universities and have been coordinated through the state higher education agency" (SREB 2001).

The Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is the recognized regional accrediting body in the eleven U.S. Southern states and Latin America for institutions of higher education. "In order to facilitate the evaluation of distance education throughout the United States, the regional accrediting associations have agreed upon the following definition and principles. This agreement is based on an extension of the Principles developed by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education" (SACS 2000).

The success factors of the RPR cycle include practices at the instruction, program, and instructor levels. Because of the varying foci of the groups producing distance education standards, there is variation in the degree to which each set of standards matches the RPR success factors. The two sets of UK standards addressed the fewest (10 each) of the 44 success factors, with the matches occurring in the areas of program policy and review, accreditation, student evaluation and support, and developing student skills. The two sets of standards developed by national agencies in the US addressed many more (14 and 16) of the success factors. The factors addressed by the US national standards included student and instructor support, program planning and review, instructor qualifications, course interactivity and student assessment. The two sets of standards created by regional agencies in the US addressed the highest number of success factors (17 and 19). Areas covered include student and instructor support, program planning and review, instructor qualifications, course interactivity, student assessment, learning materials, and information privacy.

Only 13 of 44 success factors were not specifically addressed by any of the reviewed standards documents. Factors not mentioned in the standards related to involvement of community members or stakeholders in course or program review processes, and to specific teaching strategies found to be effective in distance education, such as motivation-building, teamwork, peer review, portfolio assessment, open-ended assignments, and social strategies leading to student success.

Together, the UK, US and regional distance education standards reviewed addressed the majority of the success factors identified in the literature and practice of distance education. The standards should be considered valuable guidelines, but not complete instruction manuals for distance education providers. Providers are encouraged to continue to review the literature to add their own standards of practice to the standards provided by outside agencies.

Conclusion

With the worldwide number of Internet users expected to reach 1 billion by 2005 (Computer Industry Almanac, 2002), and the increasingly frequent need for employees to update their knowledge and skills to adapt to the rapidly changing workplace, interest in distance education will continue to grow. In response, distance education offerings will grow, and competition for students will grow. Students online have access to any online course, and the tools of the web allow students to quickly compare courses. A strength of distance education is its potential to focus the learning process on the student. Courses and programs that emphasize their focus on the student's strengths and needs will succeed in attracting students. In order to build their reputations and keep students, courses and programs must reach quality goals. High-quality distance education achievement is the outcome of the dedication of all constituents in the continual quest for the best possible resources, practices and results. With increased need for new career skills and improvement in delivery technology, distance education students will demand evidence of quality and authenticity in distance courses. It is imperative that distance education providers implement and review quality benchmarks regarding Resources-Practices-Results in response to the needs of students, employers and the community. Educational institutions must continue to develop and maintain standards, and they must clearly communicate those standards to the public. When students benefit from an education program that meets their needs, the community benefits as well.

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